

Jon N. Hale

*The Choice We Face: How Segregation, Race, and Power Have Shaped America's Most Controversial Educational Reform Movement*

Boston: Beacon Press, 2021. 288 pp.

In the last decade or so, Jon Hale has established himself as a student, scholar, and advocate of the rights and interests of African Americans to an equal education, especially but not only in the American South. With his latest book he extends his interests beyond that arena, though he certainly does not abandon them.

In *The Choice We Face*, Hale takes on the advocates of school choice, showing how their movement is, in reality, an attack on public education in the USA. American public schools have been a long-time target of the political right, and Hale is astute in showing the direct relationship between the right and its opposition to public schools, beginning with a chapter on the right-wing economist from the University of Chicago, Milton Friedman. Hale thus puts school choice firmly within a free market, anti-government approach to American society. Hale also is quick to note that school choice is “racism by another name” (62) in another early chapter. Thus, his expansion into the arena of school choice is undertaken in great part to expose the racism of many, if not most, of its advocates, linking this work directly to his earlier studies.

One interesting aspect of this study is Hale’s choice of publisher. Beacon Press, headquartered in Boston, is affiliated with the Unitarian/Universalist society and proudly publishes work with an avowedly social reform orientation. While Hale clearly and convincingly uses traditional scholarly sources and judicious arguments in this work, he also goes beyond that emphasis to embrace a public policy priority for public education and an avowed advocacy approach to that priority. In short, Hale implacably opposes the school choice movement, exposing it for what he believes it is, an undemocratic assault on American education, as represented through its public schools.

Now Hale knows, as does any reputable historian of American education, that the public school has not been an unequivocal success in achieving equity for all students. In fact, there are substantial reasons to doubt the commitment of many in public education to educational equity. But for Hale, and many other educational historians and advocates of public education, including this reviewer, the failure of public education to achieve educational equity both historically and in a contemporary context needs to be acknowledged. This acknowledgement should not lead, however, to the abandonment of the enterprise. Rather public education needs to be reformed in the interests of equity, a value that has long animated the enterprise at the rhetorical level. Turning rhetorical advocacy into institutional accomplishment is the desired outcome, not the demise of the American public school. This reviewer acknowledges the difference in the Canadian and American context regarding the existence of public schools. But I also know that in the USA, attempts to take money from public schools to support charter schools, or school vouchers for public school

students to attend private schools, in no way will enhance the school equity objectives that animate Hale and many other historians of education.

Two issues covered in depth by Hale are of special interest. The first is the advocacy of the federal government, in both Democratic and Republican administrations, for charter schools, especially charter schools that exist within a public school system. This advocacy is not surprising in a Republican administration, but it is, at least to Hale and myself, when it comes from Democratic leadership. The Obama administration and, particularly, its Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, advocated public charter schools as a meaningful approach to achieve school equity. What that advocacy has never explained, however, is how providing an institutional alternative that some students might tap can be a force in obtaining the larger goal of equity for all students.

A related issue, and one that is particularly important for Hale, is the advocacy of school choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Hale details the efforts to desegregate schools in Milwaukee in ways which alienated significant portions of the Black community. The alienation resulted in an attempt by Black leaders to create a black school district within the city schools, an attempt which garnered support from several black politicians and opposition from traditional civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The failure of this effort led, in turn, to significant Black political support for a voucher program in Milwaukee, one which would pay for Black students to attend private schools in search of a better education.

Hale is sensitive in his discussion of the various Black leaders involved in the Milwaukee debates, though he doesn't arrive at a definitive solution to the controversy that serves the cause of educational equity. Of course, that is not a criticism, rather a comment on the thorniness of the issues in Milwaukee, and many other places in the USA. Hale stops short, however, of clear condemnation of the Black activist embrace of vouchers in Milwaukee, a position that seems, at least to this reviewer, to be in tension with, if not at odds with, the opposition to choice that animates the rest of his volume.

This criticism should not take away from my larger agreement with Hale's analysis of school choice. That movement, like other right-wing movements such as the overturning of the federal right to an abortion solidified in the *Roe v Wade* case in the early 1970s, is starkly ascendant in the political landscape of the contemporary USA. Finding a way to defend the public schools is a necessary objective for those committed to the promise embedded in the ideal of the public school. Those interested in that defense will find a shrewd analysis and a political commitment to the effort in Jon Hale's book.

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